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ABSTRACT

Black Studies means an indepth investigation of the Black Experience. Without oral history methods, this will be prostituted to mean a superficial view of opinions set forth by white society. All the broad areas of Black scholarship must begin to relate to the problems of capturing the life of the race on tape and retaining it for posterity. Oral history holds that what is of importance is what actors believed the truth to be at the moment they made their moves. To determine this, one must obtain first-hand reports from the actors as well as the observers in order to determine their ideas concerning the causes of the event and the course it took. For example, a survey conducted by Chicago State College in the spring and summer of 1967, dealing with the Black community, intergroup relations, labor, intracity migration, and religious institutions produced data leading to an interpretation of those topics which could have never been arrived at in any other way. (JM)

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ORAL HISTORY AND THE BLACK STUDIES PROGRAM

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--Henry E. Simmons

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History is seldom written from any other than the elitist point of view. The masses of the Black population do not fit into the classification "elitist." These two statements spell out the problem confronting those who are tody going about the business of establishing Black Studies programs on our college campuses and in the Black community.

Since the stark reality of history would indicate that the moving actors in life's drama (the "activists" if you will) most often come from the masses, accounts of events rendered by the upper eschelon would tend to be second-hand in relationship to the action itself. The complex nature of today's society is accelerating this trend toward second-hand reporting to a point where the eye-witness account will soon be lost in the shuffle despite our technological advances.

Examples of this phenomenon are so numerous that one is prone to challenge the good intentions of many researchers now producing "Black materials" for general consumption. The writer, teacher, or "expert" cannot sit geographically, mentally and socially removed from the society being discussed and expect to report accurately what is taking place there. That is obvious. But oral history proponents contend further that the reporter on the scene cannot give an indepth account of any event until he first determines what set the wheels in motion. Without this latter form of investigation, what seems on the surface to be fact is often revealed to be fiction in the final analysis.

Oral historians have long realized that ultimately it does not matter what the truth of history was as long as one can determine what the actors believed the truth to be at the moment they made their moves. Many people have died in panics created when someone jokingly yelled "fire!" in a crowded hall. The falsehood was very real to the occupants of that room at the time. The not-so-simple solution to this problem then, is to obtain first-hand reports

UD 009 307

from the actors as well as the directors in order to determine their ideas concerning the causes of the event and the course it took.

Chicago State College conducted an experiment in the spring and summer of 1967, dealing with the Black community, intergroup relations, labor and intra-city migration of the 1930's. The findings broke the dams of stereotype in some areas.[1]

It was concluded from the interviews that most Protestant groups in Chicago during that period based their migration from the changing neighborhoods on religious grounds. In short, they followed their churches which moved first and encouraged the congregation to move! In the case of the Jewish and Catholic groups, the opposite was true. To a limited degree, the findings indicate that the religious leaders in the Protestant groups at that time led the movement away from the southside to avoid integrated society.

It was also found that in the eight-year long Trumbull Park riots in Chicago, the largest number of physical incidents took place--not in the housing project which set off the controversy, but in the vicinity of the community church blocks away. While few Blacks were attacked by whites near the housing development, many were beaten near the church. One woman was struck in the face by a parishioner, another pushed down the church steps, and all Black Catholics in the area were forced to journey to an from mass in squad cars and say their prayers while kneeling by the side of a watchful policeman. A young priest who spoke out against the violence and for integration was transferred.[2] The result--a deep enmity among those Blacks for the church.[3]

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1. Oral History Research Office, Chicago State College, 500 N. Pulaski Rd., Chicago. Labor, Migration and Intergroup Relations Archives.

2. Ibid., See specifically the Memoirs of Edward Holmgren, Elizabeth Wood, and those of NAACP members and Black policemen assigned to the area.

3. At least three of those interviewed indicated that they became Protestants as a direct result of these incidents.

Economically, Blacks involved in the struggle for jobs in the 1930's consistently told interviewers that racial antagonisms and ethnic conflict in that area seldom developed until one specific ethnic group became identifiable with the individual unions blamed for restricting Blacks in the job market. In essence, their grievance was with the union not the ethnic groups among its membership in the original instance.

On the questions of why Blacks did not work in certain sections of town, interviewers were told, "the streetcar didn't run from here to there" or "To work there, I would have had to transfer to another streetcar line over in the German section and those guys were tough!"[4] Simple, practical answers to questions which socialogists and historians have devoted countless hours and innumerable dollars of research. They could have saved steps if they had only "asked someone."

The differences are many. The white version of the immigrant question generally labels the immigrant as a radical, sometimes to the point of being anarchists. Blacks, on the other hand, viewed the immigrant as <u>conservative</u> and interested in preserving the system which elevated the newcomer because he was white and repressed the Black competitor as a matter of tradition. It would seem then that a history of the period written from materials gathered through oral interviews with Blacks would have a decidedly different slant from works prepared from traditional research sources.

Like many groups before them, Blacks have existed on the oral transmission of customs, mores, folklore and history to a great degree. The enforced illiteracy of the slavery period preserved this tradition chronologically much longer than with other groups. The repressive conditions of society since that time have served to slow down the normal evolution to written forms. An example of the results may be found in the crowded ghettoes of the nation's inner city

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4. See Chicago State College Archives.

areas. There one may find youngsters four and five generations removed from the South speaking perfect Mississippi dialect although they may never have left the half-mile square "turf" where they were born. Some ten-year olds can describe the ancestral manse in Georgia with startling clarity although they could not possibly have ever seen it. These are some results of oral transmission.

Oral versions found on tape provide insight concerning speech patterns, intonations, hints of joy and cynicism, sadness----all of which are difficult to recapture on paper even when the writer has detailed knowledge of the culture or conditions which have produced them. The following example from the Pryce-Clarke Quotient Test dealing with slang and idioms is an example of the ease and flow of the Black ghetto's "economy language".

> "Man, I just seen Joe. . .talk about rigid; my man's jaws are really tight! Somebody eased into his crib and swung with his vee, all his vines, his sides, even snatched some old roaches he was saving for hard times. I mean, he's really in a bind, Jake; couldn't even get to his gig today, on account o' he didn't have no bread or no threads. On top of that, his old lady is giving him attitude cause it don't look like he goona be able to take her to the thing at the new place this weekend. . ."[5]

This is the story of a man whose home was robbed and who is having romantic troubles. The authors go on to talk about "boss hangs", "saditty chicks", "taking care of business" and "checking people out." The language of a segment of our Black community! To translate this to "standard English" would remove the rhythm, the meaning, the impact just as much as translating the classics from Greek or Latin to English tends to corrupt the original beauty of the phrasing. Black Studies programs must present the people in their setting or they are guilty of manufacturing history and culture for the benefit of the larger society and from that society's point of view.

Often the majority <u>thinks</u> it knows what Blacs are feeling and the mistake is usually costly. The Daley organization found this out in the aldermanic

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5. The Pryce-Clarke Quotient Test is part of a new move to revise standardized tests to conform to the cultural background of the person being tested.

election in Chicago in 1967. The Black alderman put up by Mayor Richard J. Daley's team had won handily in the heavily Democratic ward on the southeast side of Chicago in previous attempts. He was considered unbeatable. However, Daley did not take the time to question the residents about this in 1967. They were disturbed because their alderman had not come to their assistance in January, 1967, when the now-famous "Big Snow" hit. Other alderman made token trips to their wards and gave out a few cases of milk and loaves of bread. Their contributions were infinitesmal in relation to the need, but they were seen. The Black alderman, who was himself snowed in, lost the election because the anti-Daley candidate personally toured the ward and was made aware of this feeling in a number of conversations with the residents.

Alfred B. Rollins, Jr. wrote in The Nation in 1967,

> "Oral history is generally accepted and plays a central role in virtually every project in recent history."[6]

He might have said, "every recent project except Black history!" Historians have notoriously avoided this method as a viable means of capturing and retaining the history of the Black man. Every day another source is lost as death claims its due. Other individuals are aged and have little time left. Rollins asked another vital question in his article:

> "Who is taping the memoirs of Manhattan's migrants from Voldosta and San Juan? Who interviews the postal clerk. . . the Third Grade teacher. . .?"[7]

Again, he might have added, "who tapes the welfare mother, the gang member, the Black policeman challenging the hyprocrisy of his own organization? Has anyone bothered to find out why Blacks did not join in the fiasco at the Democratic Convention to Chicago in 1968?" Black Studies programs which fail to realize the value of these methods of research will fall short of the goal of bringing better understanding of the Black Experience.

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6. Alfred B. Rollins, Jr., "The Voice as History", The Nation (November 20, 1967) p. 519.

7. Ibid., p. 521

For those who have already begun to record oral interviews, problems still exist. Rollings charged,

> "Most of the work is now done by historians self-trained as interviewers, reporters self-trained as historians, or part-time help hardly trained at all."[8]

The program director must evaluate the types of interviewers and match them with the interviewee---Black or white, urban or rural, rich or poor. That backwoods preacher who spent his life orally translating the Bible and acting out the scenes should not be matched with the Scarsdale, N. Y. socialite who has never spent over five minutes in the company of any Blacks other than her domestics. In many cases no white interviewer would be acceptable regardless of training and background---these are the facts of life today.

Oral history methods lend themselves to more informal, yet more informative presentation than the formal autobiography. It has no page limitations and can therefore include materials which an editor of a formal manuscript might delete under a space-cost priority. The fact that the donor may put restrictions on the use of the material and keep it under wraps for any specified number of years also lends itself to more honest presentation than the more stilted literary forms. Oral historian Gould P. Coleman stated it frankly when he wrote:

> "completeness of recording. . . differentiates oral history from other methods of obtaining data about the past."[9]

Because their literary presentations were so shallow, Walter White, Malcolm X, Marcus Garvey and even Booker T. Washington will never really be known by their posterity. If this is true of prominent figures, imagine the plight of the common man in Black society.

Where oral history collections form part of the archives of a Black Studies program, concerned writers lacking background related to the Black Experience

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8. Ibid., p. 521.

9. "Report of the Subcommittee on Goals and Guidelines, Oral History Association Archives, (September, 1966) p. 1. Gould P. Coleman, Chairman.

will be able to at least listen to the words of participants. Had William Styron been able to hear Nat Turner's extended account of his revolution as told to a Black man in whom Turner had confidence, Styron might have avoided some of the glaring cultural mistakes found in his novel.[10]

There is little doubt that the words of Martin Luther King, Jr. lose some of their vigor when reduced to paper. But few who heard the "I have a dream" address in Washington will ever forget the oral presentation.

History tells us that the South attempted to prevent Blacks from leaving the region to migrate to the West and North between 1865 and 1917. Yet, none of the very competent scholars writing about this episode have been able to convey the emotion of the events as vividly as those involved. The late Illinois State Senator William King's taped version, for instance, tells of how he and his father slipped through the woods late at night to catch a train outside of town so that none of the whites in their hometown would know that King's father was sending his son away to college.[11] The detached historian cannot hope to capture the thoughts of other Blacks who crouched shivering in the blackness of night in bushes in northern Alabama and Louisiana waiting for the Illinois Central's northbound freight to slow down enough to be boarded secretly. This is the history of Black people that Black Studies programs must capture and present. It is ethnic history at its finest.

Society is too concerned with group problems of the urban and rural ghettoes to take the time to look at the Black man as an individual. When it does, it tends to call upon the works of the whites for "expert" advice instead of going to the best source----the Black man who has lived the event. Those who write about the antebellum period too often use as sources the letters, diaries and documents of either slaveholders or abolitionists. It would stand to reason that one who is writing about slavery should also sometimes try to find out

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10. William Styron, The Confessions of Nat Turner.

11. Chicago State College Oral History Collection, William King Memoirs (1968)

what the slave was thinking.

There have been no instances of polls of the magnitude of the Gallup Poll being taken to determine down-to-earth attitudes of today's Black community. True, some so-called leaders are interviewed and some hand-picked segments of the population deemed "typical" by an executive in an office on Madison Avenue are checked. And, out of this sampling comes the "Black point of view" quotes which are spread across the front pages of the world's newspapers.

Black Studies, by contrast, means an indepth investigation of the Black Experience, and without oral history methods, this will be prostituted to mean a superficial view of opinions set forth by white society. The two are most often incompatible.

Black Studies programs, Black social and historical organizations, Black museums----all the broad areas of Black scholarship, must begin to relate to the problems of capturing the life of the race on tape and retaining it for posterity. After all, "Black is:" knowing who you are, where you came from, and how you got into this mess.